

How do teacher/student conferences regarding silent reading and student journaling
related to silent reading impact students?

Tim Mader

Garretson Elementary

Garretson South Dakota

Under the supervision of

Dr. Kristi L. Pearce

&

Ms. Michelle Hovland

Black Hills State University

Abstract

The participants in this study were 4th grade Title I students at Garretson Elementary, in the southeastern corner of South Dakota. The Title I program serves students who show evidence of having a reading deficiency or who have scored *Basic* or *Below Basic* on the South Dakota State Assessment, *The Dakota Step*. Five students participated in the study, 3 girls and 2 boys. All participants were Caucasian which was consistent with ninety-seven percent of the school population.

The action research question was: *How do teacher/student conferences regarding silent reading and student journaling related to silent reading impact students' reading achievement?* The results of this action research project indicated:

- One on one time with teaches allowed students to express feelings about reading and created attainable goals for silent reading.
- Activities used in the study as students read reflected that they paid more attention to what they were reading
- Writing about their reading allowed students the time to articulate their thoughts without the pressure of direct questioning and also provided a concrete example of comprehension for the teacher to assess.

Introduction

One aspect of my job as a Title I teacher has been to peruse United States Federal Government documents pertaining to reading instruction, and locate material that will help school and families interrelate to increase reading abilities. The U.S. Government maintains a website for the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) where literacy research findings are posted; this agency reports information on *Scientifically Based Research* studies and instructional strategies that have been instrumental in improving reading levels.

In the school where I teach, silent reading is used on a daily basis as a way to support students reading growth. However, according to NILF (2001), “no research evidence is available currently to confirm that instructional time spent on silent, independent reading with minimal guidance and feedback improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement” (p. 25). As a result, the goal of this research study was to investigate various strategies that might help struggling readers get more out of their silent reading time.

Review of Related Educational Research

“There is a myth that children who have difficulty with reading comprehension just can’t think. In reality, everybody thinks all the time,” (Cunningham and Allington, 1999, p 47.). Student/teacher conferences can improve comprehension by helping students understand the text. Conferencing gives students a forum to express ideas in a safe environment and allows the teacher to disseminate strategies that will allow students to extract information while reading. “The real problem is not that they can’t think, but that they don’t think while they read,” (Cunningham and Allington, 1999, p 47.)

Teachers need to encourage readers to express their thoughts in a non-judgmental environment. Cunningham and Allington (1999) addressed problems with silent reading and students’ abilities to express themselves. “Struggling readers need to share what they read with others. When adult readers read good books, they talk to people about these books. When provided the same opportunity, children flourish as readers” (p.33). Small instructional groups can encourage struggling readers to share their thoughts about what they have read.

In writing about their reading, struggling readers are also given opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings related to texts. Journaling linked to reading assists students in making connections which increase the chances of long-term retention of the information. Calkins (1983) discussed her realization of the connection between reading and writing:

Yes, I was wrong to view the two processes of reading and writing as separate.

Wrong because writing involves reading and because it reinforces and develops skills traditionally viewed as reading skills...when children are makers of reading, they gain a sense of ownership from their reading. As we've seen again and again, owners are different from tenants. (p.155-156)

When students write, there is no rush to come up with answers, students are allowed time to digest and express information at their own speed.

In teaching reading to the lowest performers, book selection is critical. Poor readers often choose books their classmates are reading and these books are typically harder than teacher assigned material according to research by Southgate, Arnold and Johnson (as cited by Krashen, 1993). Teachers need to assist the struggling readers and reinforce appropriate book selection practices. Krashen (1993) stated that "It is reasonable to expect that assigned reading will have an impact on literacy development if it is interesting and comprehensible" (p.29).

Providing high interest reading materials for students has been shown to increase reading levels. In Rucker's (1982) research he provided students with magazine subscriptions, which were chosen based on student interest surveys. These magazines were sent to a random group of students, Students who received the subscriptions ended the year with superior gains on standardized tests. Translating this to the classroom will especially help the struggling reader. By providing a variety of genres that students find interesting, teachers could eliminate the time lower students wasted browsing through material that is often times above their reading level as shown by Appleby and Conner (As cited by Krashen, 1993). It was my observation that the poor readers were more

likely to “kill” time perusing material, while the upper level readers spent a majority of time on task. Providing high quality choices has a positive effect on lower students; grouping interesting, appropriate material together allows for effective use of time. (Krashen, 1993, p.84-85)

Interventions and Data Collection

The research question developed naturally as a result of my position as a Title I teacher. My peers and I have often discussed how to improve the levels of struggling readers. What holds them back, what techniques could help, where do we find these answers? Basically my question came out of desperation! Reading instruction had so far failed these students; as a result, I wondered if classroom teachers and myself could use this silent reading time more effectively.

The first step in the study began with consultations involving the classroom teachers, principal, and my students. Together we developed the interventions and data gathering methods.

Interventions

- The classroom teacher and the researcher each conferred with students about their silent reading on a weekly basis.
- Students wrote about their silent reading and shared the journals with the classroom teacher and the teacher researcher.

Data Collection Methods

1. The classroom teacher and the researcher recorded notes during weekly conferences with each student.
2. The students' journals related to silent reading were collected.
3. Interviewed parents and students regarding attitudes toward silent and regular reading.
4. The teachers observed the Title I students during silent reading time in their regular classroom setting.
5. Assessed students using the STARS assessment twice during the study.

Results

1. Interview

Interview Question	Yes	No
Did students enjoy silent reading?	40%	60%
Did parents enjoy silent reading as a child?	40%,	60%
Do parents enjoy silent reading now?	100%	-
Do parents read with child?	100%	-
Do parents need to remind students to read?	80%	20 %
How much time did the students spend away from school reading per week?	0-1 hour 60%	1-2 hours 40%

2. Documentation of classroom teacher and researcher weekly conferences

The students who were in Title 1 as a result of *poor test performances* had almost identical answers to the interview questions. The evidence indicated the students who enjoyed silent reading were able to articulate what they had read, and report what they were currently reading.

Students who were in Title I based on *poor reading levels* were at the other end of the spectrum. They didn't enjoy silent reading, had great difficulty even recalling the title of the last book they had read, and knew few if any correct facts. Students in this group also had problems explaining how to choose an appropriate book, which may help explain why they couldn't finish a book. These students tend to choose books based on what their

peers are reading; yet, these books are usually several levels above their reading ability level.

3. Student Journals

Evidence indicated writing about silent reading helped students stay on task and they were less likely to choose “too difficult” books if they knew they had to write about their reading. Also, having teachers check their journals helped to motivate students to work harder than if they had been responsible to themselves. Journaling also provided teachers concrete examples of student comprehension and personal thoughts about a text.

4. Observations of the regular classroom

There are two 4th grade teachers who helped me on this project, Mrs. King and Miss Noles. Mrs. King had two of the students participating in the study in her classroom. As previously stated in the *Results* section, number two, there appeared to be two types of students; *poor readers* and *poor test takers*. Mrs. King’s reading class was one hour in length. At the beginning of silent reading time C, a poor reader with a second grade reading level, leafed through magazines, looked at pictures and occasionally read captions; he was easily distracted. C spent twenty minutes out of thirty just browsing through books and magazines. He never engaged in any actual reading, rather he appeared to be trying to look busy. Halfway through Mrs. King’s silent reading class, C was involved in a group activity (with four others). Students had a book talk, and discussed their jobs, (gathering unknown vocabulary from the text, etc.) This small group time was very productive. C and the other students were engaged, making connections, and answering student and teacher generated questions. The other student in this class is

JW; she reads at a fourth grade reading level and appears to have difficulty taking tests.

JW was engaged in her reading of a teacher recommended book about 80% of the time.

In Miss Noles' class the events were similar. At the beginning of class the participating students were to read silently. The poor readers again did not become involved with their reading material, while the poor test takers were on task. Midway through class Miss Noles lead a book talk that included the participating students. Students who became distracted were gently coaxed back to the topic; they generated connections and predictions. Miss Noles also led an author discussion on similarities between books in the series they were reading. In Miss Noles' class, like Mrs. Kings, the lower reading students were less productive when the teacher wasn't directly involved. The students classified as poor test takers were involved with their reading and on task a majority of the time.

5. *Test students using STARS throughout the study to see if the interventions have a positive effect on reading levels*

Students were administered the STARS computer assessment test intermittently throughout the research time frame. The time between tests was so short that there were no noticeable improvements. Consequently, the testing of students with the STARS assessment did not contribute reliable information to the study as it was impossible to observe student change over time.

Conclusions

The results of this action research project revealed evidence that:

- 1) Students stayed on task during small group instruction.
- 2) Journaling was effective in increasing comprehension and journaling gave students an arena to express thoughts and opinions without fear of peer rebuttal.
- 3) Students may benefit from teacher imposed timelines to complete work.

Data Interpretations

The Title I readers who struggled the most disliked reading in most every form; silent, oral, choral, and especially in front of an audience. These same students also loved doing plays if the play was at an appropriate reading level. The students also preferred not to perform in front of higher achieving peers.

Many of the parents of these poor readers expressed a dislike of reading when they were in school, but now all enjoyed reading. Perhaps with practice and experience these students will also find a love for reading in their adulthoods.

Even though I have utilized small group instruction in my Title I program in the past, students were reluctant to express themselves when in front of other students. During the interviews conducted in this study, students I've taught for years revealed important feelings regarding reading that were previously unknown to me; as a result, I will continue to interview students each fall. The individual interviews were a time where students were free to discuss past issues that might have been hindering their reading progress. The one on one discussions used in this study seemed to allow the students to express their feelings and scholastic goals. In the future, the interviews may assist me to

better understand students' fears, goals, and to determine areas of interest and choose appropriate instructional materials.

Writing about their silent reading appeared to assist students in remaining on task which had been a struggle for the lower writers. Journaling and discussing what they had written seemed to be positive activities that promoted ownership, and allowed students to accomplish goals individually. By examining the students' writing about their reading, the teachers and the researcher were able to observe some of what the students retained. However, writing in small group instructional groups was not as successful as other small group activities.

The classroom observations revealed that the readers who struggled most did not use time wisely. These students got up from their desks more often than other students because they were only *scanning* their chosen materials or leafing through magazines.

During the classroom observations, the students stayed on task when they participated with the teacher in small group reading activities. The structure of the small group instruction combined with a timeline to complete their reading and corresponding work assisted the students in staying on task.

Finally, all of the students in this study had parents who struggled with reading when they were young. Yet, each expressed they enjoyed reading as adults. Could this be because a teacher was not standing over their shoulder telling them what to read? Or, is it because they now read effectively and it no longer seems like work? In either case, we as teachers still have to encourage the budding readers to sample all types of literature, to take a chance on something new, and read for fun.

I remember reading *The Red Pony* (Steinbeck et al., 1983) in middle school and thinking, “what a bunch of depressing drivel”. Last week as I walked through our school library I saw a section of Steinbeck, I grabbed *Tortilla Flats* (Steinbeck et al, 1970) and thoroughly enjoyed it. The writing is exactly what I like, sparse, with real life laid out in between the lines. Hopefully, these students will find little gems to ponder when they are adults.

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